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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000805

SIPDIS

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ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER  
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
PARIS FOR RWALLER  
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI TELLS PETRAEUS ASSISTANCE FOR LAF  
CRUCIAL TO COUNTERING HIZBALLAH

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a June 30 meeting with Commanding General U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) General David Petraeus, Prime Minister-Designate Saad Hariri said he had begun consultations on government formation, and though the opposition and the Syrians would make the process difficult, he was confident he would succeed. He stressed that his government would be committed to strengthening state institutions, including the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces (ISF), in an effort to counter Hizballah, and said he planned to work with Arab partners, in addition to the United States, to equip the security forces quickly. General Petraeus highlighted the continued U.S. commitment to assisting the LAF, and outlined his ideas on ways to move the military-to-military relationship forward. He encouraged Hariri to work in close consultation with the U.S. on military planning, particularly with respect to equipment procurement. Hariri noted that he intended to pursue economic reforms in parallel to his work on the military and police. He said the June 28 Sunni-Shia clashes in West Beirut were not isolated incidents, but were intended to send a political message to his political coalition. End summary.

HARIRI WANTS TO EQUIP THE ARMY,  
PETRAEUS PUSHES FOR REALISM

2. (C) U.S. CENTCOM Commander General David Petraeus, accompanied by the Ambassador, the CENTCOM delegation, and Embassy staff, called on Prime Minister-Designate Saad Hariri at Qoreitem June 30. Hariri advisors Nader Hariri and Amal Mudallali also attended the meeting. Hariri noted he had had 22 consultation meetings to discuss government formation on June 29, and heard many different visions of how the next government should take shape. He said his objective is to form a national unity government, but without a blocking minority for the opposition. He relayed that the Saudis had been actively engaging the Syrians, both before and after the elections, to keep things calm in Lebanon. According to

Hariri, however, the Syrians and their Lebanese allies were still a problem, and would make impossible demands to complicate the cabinet formation process. Despite this, he was confident he would succeed.

¶3. (C) Hariri posited that the issue of Hizballah's weapons was not one that could be solved internally in Lebanon, because of its "regional dimension." He praised President Obama's appointment of Senator Mitchell as Special Envoy for Middle East Peace, saying, "The closer we come to peace, the less Hizballah will be able to do." While awaiting progress toward peace among Lebanon's neighbors, Hariri believed the best strategy for Lebanon was to strengthen the central government and state institutions, particularly the security services. He noted that Hizballah often justifies its weapons by claiming the LAF and ISF are not strong enough to defend Lebanese sovereignty, and in fact, said Hariri, the claims are correct. For this reason, he insisted he would dedicate significant time and effort as head of the next government to "beef up" the LAF and the ISF and equip the LAF with small tanks, vehicles, helicopters, and other equipment crucial to their response capabilities. He also expressed his desire to acquire fixed-wing aircraft for the LAF.

¶4. (C) While he appreciated ongoing U.S. assistance to the LAF, Hariri noted that the problem with the U.S. procurement process was that it was slow, and he expected further delays because of the need to gain congressional approval for the transfer of certain technologies to Lebanon, to ensure that Israel's qualitative military advantage is not threatened. In any event, said Hariri, his government plans to ask Arab

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nations to provide Lebanon with funds. Lebanon would, he suggested, procure equipment elsewhere if the U.S. system was not responsive. He looked to the U.S. administration to defend Lebanon's equipment purchases with those in Washington and elsewhere who might object. Hariri stated that he was "planning to move quite fast" and added that the way he saw it, Lebanon needs a Marshall Plan for all of its equipment, including uniforms and replacement carbines for the circa 1960s M16s in use by the LAF.

¶5. (C) General Petraeus affirmed the U.S. commitment to continued and increased assistance to the LAF, and stressed that multiple U.S. agencies were working together on a careful examination of how to move the program forward. He said he understood the Lebanese request for close air support, and the U.S. was looking closely at what options presented the best combination of capability and affordability, both in terms of the equipment price and operational costs. He revealed that he planned to discuss with interim Defense Minister Murr and LAF Commander General Kahwagi the possibility of Lebanon acquiring OV-10 aircraft for close air support. The dozen OV-10 aircraft (which had been used by the Department of State in counternarcotics operations) provided a practical, inexpensive option for close air support in counterterrorism and internal security operations (such as the LAF's 2007 engagement at Nahr al-Barid). General Petraeus also put forth possible options for adding light attack helicopters to Lebanon's fleet.

PETRAEUS: CONSULT WITH US BEFORE OBTAINING NON-USG EQUIPMENT

¶6. (C) General Petraeus told Hariri he was enthusiastic that Hariri may be able to generate funding from certain of his "Arab brothers" for equipment purchases, but underscored the importance of a realistic procurement plan, based on Lebanon's needs. He advised Hariri to consult closely with the United States on compatibility with U.S.-procured equipment, and encouraged him to examine fully the maintenance and operating expenses of equipment offered by other countries, particularly given Lebanon's infrastructure and resource constraints. He pointed specifically to the 10 MIG-29 aircraft Russia offered to the LAF in December 2008,

saying they are so expensive to operate that the Lebanese would likely only be able to fl them a few hours per year -- "enough for a parae." He emphasized that the Lebanese needed to esure they considered the costs of military hardware, maintenance, repair parts, tools, and diagnostic equipment. Although Hariri stated that he wanted to acquire small tanks, Petraeus told him he should take a hard look at wheeled armored behicles with a vee-shaped hull, a lesson the U.S. Armed Forces had learned over the previous seven years of combat. Meanwhile, Petraeus stressed, the LAF was particularly in need of good training, in all aspects of military operation, since high-tech equipment is only as good as the people running it. Because of the training requirement, Petraeus noted that he wanted to construct a small compound which would allow Central Command to expand training for the LAF. The Ambassador also noted the importance of strengthening the ISF so that, over time, it would assume the policing tasks being performed by the Lebanese Army.

#### PLANS FOR THE ECONOMY

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17. (SBU) Hariri stated that in parallel with his efforts to build up the security services, he plans to pursue economic reforms, streamline business procedures, and improve the investment climate. He stressed the need for investment in electricity and water, and noted that \$3.3 billion in money pledged for infrastructure investment at the 2007 Paris III donor conference was still not disbursed, pending reforms by the government. To follow the Paris III portfolio, Hariri said he would insist that the new Finance Minister come from

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his own Future Movement.

#### SUNNI-SHIA CLASHES

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18. (C) Hariri assessed that the violent clashes June 28 in West Beirut between members of his Future Movement and Nabih Berri's Amal party were not "isolated incidents," but in fact reflected a targeted political decision. Fortunately, he added, the army responded strongly, ordering its soldiers to shoot any armed men they spotted in the streets, and the situation calmed. Nonetheless, he believed the clashes were unacceptable, saying, "I won't start my watch with things like this."

19. (U) General Petraeus has cleared this cable.  
SISON